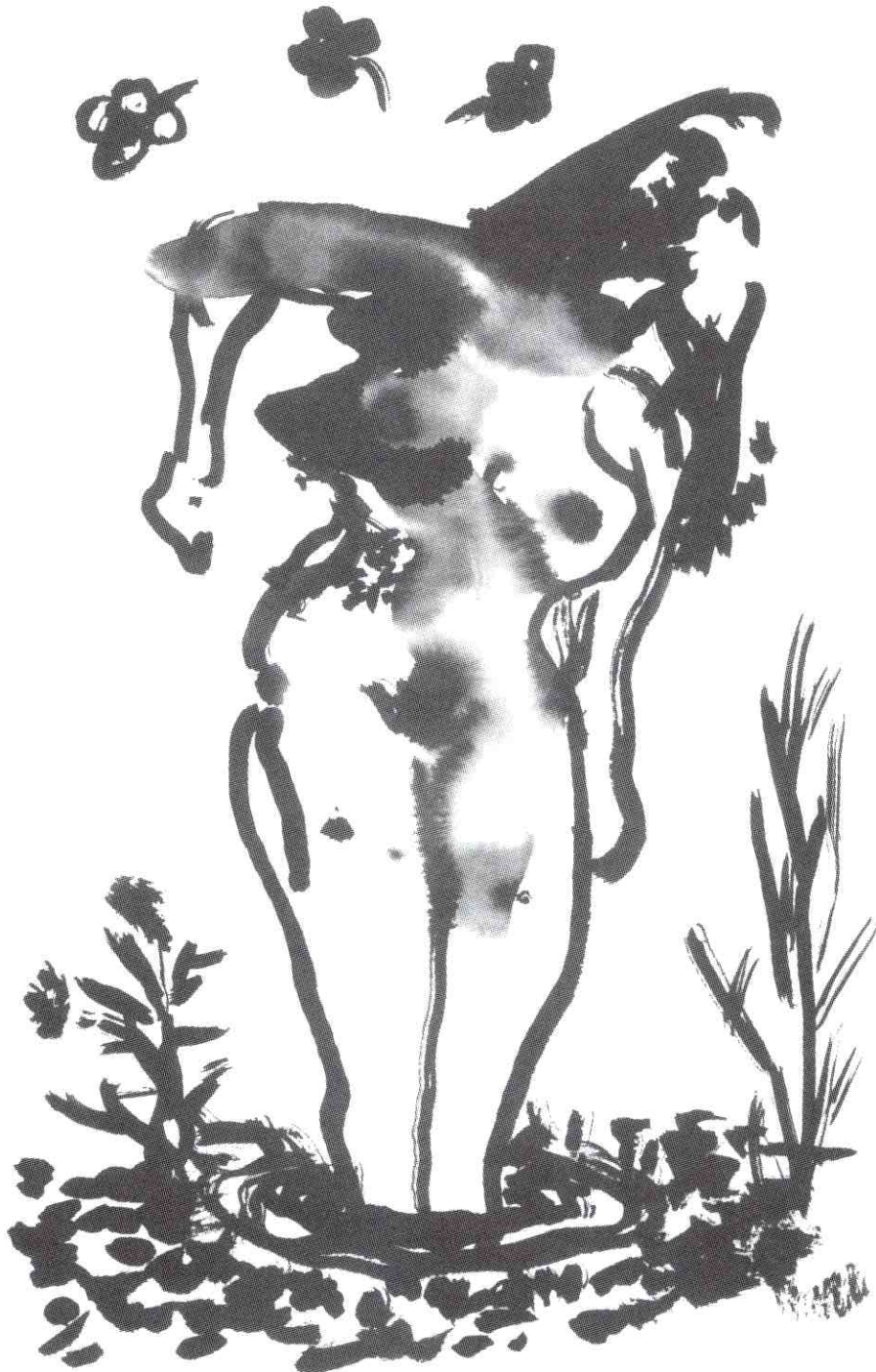


Parable OF THE EXCHANGE¹

Juan José Arreola



Drawings by Lydla Peña

To the cry of "I exchange old wives for new!" the merchant canvassed the streets of the town with his convoy of painted carts.

Transactions, based on inexorably fixed prices, were carried out rapidly. Those interested received proofs of quality and certificates of guaranty, but nobody had a choice. According to the merchant, his were twenty-four carat women, all blonde and Circassian. More than blonde, golden as candlesticks.

As soon as men saw their neighbor's acquisition, they ran pell-mell after the dealer. Many were ruined. Only a newlywed man could get an even exchange. His wife was brand new and did not compare unfavorably with the exotic women. But she wasn't as blonde as they.

I was all atremble behind my window as a sumptuous cart passed by. Reclining among cushions and curtains, a woman who seemed a leopard gazed dazzlingly up at me, as from a block of topaz. Seized with that contagious frenzy, I was on the point of hurtling through the glass panes, but then ashamed, I turned away from the window to look at Sophia.

She was calm, embroidering the usual initials on a new table cloth. Untouched by the tumult, she threaded her needle with sure fingers. Only I who know her could notice her faint, imperceptible pallor. At the end of the street the merchant made his disturbing proclamation a last time: "I exchange old wives for new!" But I stayed with my feet glued to the floor, shutting my ears to this definitive opportunity. Outside the town was all in an uproar.

Incapable of any comment, Sophia and I had supper in silence. Carrying out the plates, she finally said to me, "Why didn't you exchange me for another wife?"

I couldn't answer her and we fell more deeply into the vacuum. We went to bed early but couldn't sleep. Separated and silent, that night we played the role of stony guests.

From then on we lived in a little desert island, surrounded by tempestuous happiness. The town seemed a chicken run infested with peacocks. Lazy and voluptuous, the new women would spend the day lolling abed. They would come out at dusk, resplendent in the setting sun, like silken yellow banners.


Not for a moment did their complacent and submissive husbands leave them. Caught in this honeyed sweetness, the men neglected their work, never thinking of tomorrow.

In the neighborhood they thought I was a fool, and I lost the few friends I had. They all believed that I wanted to teach them a lesson, giving an absurd example of fidelity. They pointed at me with their fingers, laughing, casting sly remarks at me from their richly entrenched position. They dubbed me with obscene nicknames, and I wound up feeling like a kind of eunuch in that eden of pleasures.

For her part, Sophia became more and more withdrawn and silent. She refused to go out with me in order to avoid comparisons and contrasts.



What is worse, she reluctantly fulfilled her strictest marital duties. To speak truly, we both felt embarrassed by such modestly conjugal love.



Her guilty air was what offended me most. She felt herself responsible for my not having a wife like the others. From the very first she thought that her humble everyday look was incapable of erasing the tempting image I carried in my head. Before the invaders' beauty she beat a retreat to the farthest corners of mute resentment. In vain I used up all our little savings, buying her trinkets, perfumes, jewels and dresses.

"Don't pity me!"

She turned her back on all the gifts. If I made an effort to pamper her, she would answer tearfully, "I'll never pardon you for not exchanging me!"

She blamed me for everything. I was running out of patience. Recalling the leopard woman, I wished with all my heart that the merchant would come through town again.

Then one day the blondes started to get oxidized. Our little island recovered its oasis quality, now surrounded by desert. A hostile desert, full of wild, discontented cries. Dazzled at first sight, the men had not really looked closely at those women, nor had it occurred to them to assay their metal. Far from being new, they were secondhand, thirdhand, God knows how many hands old. The merchant simply made some indispensable repairs on them, and gave them a bath of such cheap, thin-layered gold that it didn't resist the test of the first rains.

The first man to notice something odd didn't let on about it, nor did the

second. But the third, a druggist, noticed one day the characteristic emanation of sulphate of copper mingled in the aromas which came from his wife. Alarmed, he examined her closely and found dark stains on her skin. Then he started to yell to high heaven.

Soon similar blemishes appeared on all the women's faces, as if an epidemic of rust had broken out among them. The husbands hid their wives' defects from each other, secretly tormented with terrible suspicions concerning their cause. Little by little the truth came out, and each one learned that he had received a counterfeit woman.

The bridegroom who had been borne along on the current of enthusiasm which the exchanges provoked fell into a profound gloom. Obsessed by the memory of a body of unequivocal whiteness, he soon gave signs of madness. One day he began removing the remaining gold on his wife's body with corrosive acids, and she was left a sorry sight, a veritable mummy.

Sophia and I found ourselves envied and hated. I thought it best to take some precautions, but Sophia was loathe to dissimulate her jubilation, and she took to going out in her best finery, sparkling in the midst of so much desolation. Far from attributing some merit to my conduct, Sophia naturally thought I had stayed with her out of cowardliness and that I had really wanted to exchange her.

Today the expedition of deceived husbands left town to search for the merchant. It was really a sad spectacle. The men shook their fists in the air, vowing vengeance. The women went about in mourning, faded and disheveled, like whining lepers. The only man who stayed home is the famous newlywed, and people fear for his sanity. Showing signs of a maniacal attachment, he now declares that he will remain faithful until death parts him from his tarnished wife, whom he completely ruined with the sulfuric acid.

I don't know what my life will be like at the side of a foolish or prudent Sophia. For the present, her admirers are absent.

Now we are on a real island, surrounded by solitude on every side. Before leaving, the husbands declared that they would seek even in Hell for traces of their deceiver, and in truth, they all assumed the faces of condemned men on saying this.

Sophia is not as dark as she seems. In the lamplight, her slumbering face is filled with reflections, as if light, golden thoughts of pride issued from her dreams. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Taken from Juan José Arreola's book, *Confabulario and Other Inventions*, trans. George D. Shade (Austin, Texas: U. of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 180-185.